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ARTICLE

Less Human, More Ourselves: Michel Houellebecq's Neohumans and the Anthropocene Subject

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This essay explores the way in which Michel Houellebecq's literary depictions of a genetically modified 'human' race, described as 'neohumans', articulate the distress of the Anthropocene subject and explore the evolution of subjectivity in a techno-natural context. Considering Houellebecq's work in an ecocritical context, this essay seeks to expand current readings of the author in order to illuminate the implications of his vision of the self-reflexive Anthropocene subject. It seeks to explore how creation myths evolve in the Anthropocene era and what it means for humans to act on themselves in this context. This also opens up questions around the framing of our current epoch as 'Anthropocene', and seeks to examine, through Houellebecq's account, the pessimism of this understanding, and the myth of human exceptionalism that underpins it. Focusing on *Atomised* (2000) and *The Possibility of an Island* (2006), I seek to illuminate Houellebecq's gestures towards an Anthropocene sensibility, and to assess his accounts of self-negation at subject and species level with regard to the concept of 'shadowtime, defined as 'the sense of living in two or more orders of temporal scale simultaneously'. Further, it seeks to question the role of literature in addressing these concerns, positing the emergence of a contemporary literature of 'futurised presents' (J. G. Ballard's 'next five minutes'), of which Houellebecq's work is part.

Keywords: Anthropocene; neohuman; ecocriticism; Houellebecq; speculative fiction

Extending Ecocriticism: Bridging the 'Authenticity Gap'

In 2003, France was hit by its worst heat wave since 1500 (Pomadère *et al*, 2005). Nearly 15,000 deaths were linked to the heat wave, many of them amongst the elderly population. Michel Houellebecq's 2005 novel, *The Possibility of an*

Island, incorporated and extended this 'natural' disaster in a brief aside in the narrative:

Like every year now, summer was scorching in France, and like every year the old died en masse, owing to lack of care, in their hospitals and retirement homes; but people had long since stopped feeling indignant about this, it had become in some way passed into tradition, as though it were a natural means of solving the statistical problem of an increasingly ageing population that was necessarily prejudicial to the economic stability of the country. (2005: 303–4)

In this short comment, Houellebecq illustrates his awareness of the anthropogenic climate change that has occasioned the reclassification of our geologic era as 'Anthropocene' (Steffen et al, 2007). He comments on the mode of adaptation employed by the population at large: a reframing of 'nature' to incorporate occurrences that are neither natural nor inevitable. People accept this *as though* it were a natural means of solving a population crisis, although both climate change and increased life expectancy are a result of anthropogenic activity (McMichael, 2014). Further to this, Houellebecq situates the rationale for this acceptance as rooted in economic logic: the problem of overpopulation is 'statistical', and threatens 'economic stability'. This language echoes the way in which the rhetoric of neoliberal governance bureaucratises human life, and euphemises its unpalatable realities through rephrasing them in the abstract language of the market – processes of 'abstraction and categorisation' (Hibou, 2015). The passage also references the individualisation (or 'atomisation', in Houellebecq's terminology) of life under neoliberalism; the elderly die in institutions, already removed from their homes and separate from families who, it seems, have become detached, ceasing to care about this phenomenon. This depiction matches the reality of the 2003 heat wave: Pomadère *et al* report that in two thirds of deaths in Paris and the surrounding areas, the deceased was resident in an institution, rather than a private home (2005: 1486–7).

In beginning with this passage, I am seeking to demonstrate the way in which awareness of the Anthropocene permeates Houellebecq's work, in both

'environmental' and 'human' terms, although this is, evidently, a somewhat spurious distinction. Houellebecq's work has long been noted for its exploration of the neoliberalisation of sexual relationships: that is, the extension of the market into the 'private' realm of everyday life. Hence the title of his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), which translates as 'the extension of the domain of the struggle' (published in English as *Whatever* in 1998). In his follow up, *Atomised* (2000), Houellebecq extended his own philosophical domain beyond humanity. The novel tells the story of Michel Djerzinski, a molecular biologist who discovers a way to copy any cell perfectly, and thus makes cloning – and 'immortality' – possible. This narrative is framed by an unspecified neohuman voice, reflecting on Djerzinski's life and work from some future time where humanity has more or less chosen to facilitate its own extinction, in favour of the 'more perfect' neohumans. This theme of the novel is revisited in *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), which offers an extensive account of neohumanity, interweaving the narrative of a contemporary human (Daniel, known also as Daniel1) with that of two of his 'successors', as the neohuman clones refer to themselves. Although *The Possibility of an Island* also features a biotechnologist (Miskiewicz, given the nickname 'Knowall' for his tendency to subsume all life into scientific rational discourse), its protagonist is actually a comedian – Daniel is a middle aged Frenchman who becomes entangled with a New Age sect called the Elohimites, modelled on the Raëlians, a real world UFO sect.

Previously, this strand of Houellebecq's work has generally been read as posthumanist (Morrey, 2013) or dystopian, albeit in a loosely anthropogenic context (Ginn, 2015). I am seeking to extend these readings to situate Houellebecq's work in an ecocritical context. Both novels offer critical reflection on contemporary networks of biopower, and on the way in which human desire has been the engine of anthropogenic change. This accords with Greg Garrard's account of the function of ecocriticism at the present time, which emphasises the prevalence of Foucauldian approaches within the discipline, resulting in 'the *historicization of ecology* and the *ecologization of history*' (2014: 3; emphasis in original), and with Dipesh Chakrabarty's description of the 'energy-intensive' form of human freedoms since the Enlightenment (2009: 208). I am also responding to theorists such as

Richard Kerridge, Astrid Bracke and Nicole Seymour. Bracke and Kerridge make convincing calls for the expansion of ecocritical practice, seeking to broaden the remit of ecocritical reading beyond work directly situated in, or thematically concerned with, 'pure' nature. Bracke advocates an expansive 'urban ecocriticism', recuperating readings of the contemporary novel and other forms that do not necessarily take 'nature' as their primary theme or setting (2014). This approach, it seems to me, offers a more fruitful way to recognise the collapse between the cultural and the natural, and to offer readings that conceive of a 'social' ecocriticism. In a similar vein, Kerridge asks the reader to attend to the *function* of work, something like its 'activist potential' (2014: 362–63; 372–75).

Nicole Seymour also seeks to move away from any prescriptive understanding of ecocriticism, and asks us to consider the utility of an 'irreverent ecocriticism': 'instead of remaining serious in the face of self-doubt, ridicule, and broader ecological crisis, we [should] embrace our sense of our own absurdity, our uncertainty, our humour, even our perversity' (2012: 57). Although Houellebecq is often read as pessimistic or depressive, his work delights in absurdity – from the philosophical dialogues between animals authored by the unnamed protagonist of *Whatever* to the comedic stylings of Daniel in *The Possibility of an Island*, whose shows include 'We Prefer the Palestinian Orgy Sluts' and 'Let's Drop Miniskirts on Palestine!' (2005: 35). Uncertainty about the future on both a personal and planetary level motivates the speculative form of his novels, and humour and perversity abound in his work too. This can be seen in the epilogue of *The Possibility of an Island*, when neohuman Daniel²⁵ presents us with a deadpan critique of environmentalism:

The last centuries of human civilization, it is a little known but significant fact, had seen the appearance in western Europe of movements inspired by a strangely masochistic ideology, known as 'ecologicism', although it bore little relation to the science of that name. These movements emphasised the necessity of protecting 'nature' from human activity, and pleaded for the idea that all species, whatever their degree of development, had an equal 'right'

to occupy the planet; some followers of these movements even seemed to systematically take the side of the animals against men, to feel more sorrow at the news of a disappearance of a species of invertebrates than at that of a famine ravaging the population of a continent. ... my first neohuman predecessors, such as Daniel¹³ and Daniel¹⁴, emphasise the sense of slight irony with which they watch dense forests, populated by wolves and bears, spreading rapidly over the old industrial complexes. (Houellebecq, 2005: 396)

Houellebecq uses the neohuman narrator here to give vent to the very frustrations Seymour suggests ecocritics face. As she writes,

My students often ask me if I think there's hope for the future of the planet. I tell them I think it's probably going to hell in a handbasket, and all of us with it. And then I laugh.

I laugh in part – I must confess – because it's hilarious to see so many faces, brimming with expectant hopefulness, droop into despondency. I can't help myself. But I'm also laughing at myself – at the absurdity of my position, as a person who writes and teaches about environmental ethics and the connectivity of the human and the non-human but is unsure if, in the end, any of that work matters. (2012: 56)

Both *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island* work in the space Seymour identifies as the 'authenticity gap' between knowledge and behaviour, to paraphrase Kerridge's reading (Kerridge, 2014: 364). This 'gap' is the space between our knowledge of the probability of environmental disaster, and our suppression – which amounts to refusal – of the reality of this knowledge: 'our knowledge and our behavior cannot both be authentic, can they?' (Kerridge, 2014: 364). This gap is ridiculous, absurd – and real.

One reason for this gap, as suggested by Chakrabarty and explored in Houellebecq's work, is the disjuncture between individual consciousness and

self-awareness at species level. It is the latter, it seems, which is required in order to 'fill in' our authenticity gap. Chakrabarty asks:

Who is the we? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like mankind, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept. (2009: 220)

In *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island*, Houellebecq explores this question, seeking to probe both the limitations and the possibilities of 'Anthropocene subjectivity'. In writing neohuman narratives, Houellebecq adopts a strategy that goes some way to bridging the authenticity gap, offering a vision of a 'world without us' in the style of Alan Weisman's powerful thought experiment (Weisman, 2007). Where Weisman's exercise imagines the sudden disappearance of humans from the face of the earth, Houellebecq's work mediates the ontological shock of non-existence through these 'intermediary' figures – the neohumans – and the destabilised temporal space of their layered and indeterminate narratives, which enact a reflexive commentary on human life from an inhuman perspective, rendering meaning partial and provisional.

(Re)Creating Our Selves: Neohuman Creation Myths

As mentioned earlier, the narrative of *Atomised* is framed by an unspecified neohuman speaker (or collective of speakers, as befits a post-individual society). We are told at the opening that 'This book is principally the story of a man who lived out the greater part of his life in Western Europe, in the latter half of the twentieth century' (Houellebecq, 2000: 3). The specificity of this account – focused on one man, one place, one time – stands in contrast to the vastness of the biblical creation myth. In Genesis, God creates the heaven and the earth: light, dark, night, day, sky, land, sea. *Atomised* begins with (a) man – a *biologist* – who disappears before us even as we are introduced to him: 'At the time of his disappearance, Michel Djerzinski was

unanimously considered to be a first-rate biologist and a serious contender for the Nobel prize' (Houellebecq, 2000: 3). Djerzinski is the intellectual originator of this new life, and of the rift between the human and the neohuman. Of biotechnologists, Bill McKibben writes, 'It is the simple act of creating new forms of life that changed the world – that puts us forever in the deity business. We will never again be a created being; instead we will be creators' (1990: 154). Djerzinski is not worshipped, however. The idea of god-like creator is, in this account, a manmade myth. Once man is gone, there is no need for any mystical origin story. And while this book is framed as a tribute to mankind, it is not an elegy, for the neohumans cannot lament the passing of a species they perceive as vile and unhappy (Houellebecq, 2000: 379).

The Possibility of an Island confronts the reader with a beginning before the beginning: the novel opens with an unmarked prologue comprising a direct address from Houellebecq to the reader, a biblical interjection of sorts – 'Who, among you, deserves eternal life?' (2005: 2) – and a message to readers from an as yet unknown neohuman narrator. This layering continues throughout the novel, with the primary narrative of Daniel¹ woven through with commentary from Daniels 24 and 25. These 'books of Daniel' are true to the apocalyptic content of the biblical Book of Daniel, although the apocalypse in *The Possibility of an Island* is figured in terms of ecological disaster:

The melting of the ice occurred at the First Decrease, and reduced the population of the planet from fourteen billion to seven hundred million.

The Second Decrease was more gradual; it happened throughout the whole of the Great Drying Up, and continues to this day.

The Third Decrease will be definitive; it is yet to come. (Houellebecq, 2005: 95)

Rather than acts of God, these disasters are distinctly manmade. We learn later that the First Decrease was the result of the detonation of thermonuclear bombs at the North and South poles, resulting in the melting of the ice caps (Houellebecq, 2005: 389). The neohumans, according to Daniel²⁵, see destruction as the innate

destiny of the human race, based on their – our – violent nature, and inability to see the imminent outcome of their – our – behaviour (the authenticity gap, again):

A violent, savage future was what awaited men; many were aware of it even before the unleashing of the first troubles . . . This anticipatory awareness, however, did not enable men in any way to put into action, or even to imagine any kind of solution. (Houellebecq, 2005: 390)

In *Atomised*, the eradication of the human race is more banal than this. Following the introduction of the neohuman species, who in this novel have been designed to experience extreme sensory pleasure without the biological necessity of sex, human reproductive rates start to fall. By the close of the novel, extinction is all but inevitable: 'Contrary to the doomsayers, this extinction is taking place peaceably, despite occasional acts of violence which will continue to decline. It has been surprising to note the meekness, the resignation, perhaps even the relief of humans at their own passing away' (Houellebecq, 2005: 378).

In *The Possibility of an Island*, neohumans have evolved a religion of their own. Based on the teachings of the 'Supreme Sister', and organised around the negation of any desire that seems 'human', this religion has three pillars of faith: 'the rigorous duplication of the genetic code, meditation on the life story of the predecessor, the writing of the commentary' (Houellebecq, 2005: 154). The neohumans of this novel are not the perfect race of *Atomised*. There are frequent references to their intermediary state, and their vaguely millenarian religion sees them awaiting the coming of the 'Future Ones' (Houellebecq, 2005: 142, 154, 414). The religion of the Supreme Sister promotes a Buddhist self-negation that aligns with Schopenhauer's teachings, with the aim that individual behaviour should be 'as predictable as the functioning of a refrigerator' (Houellebecq, 2005: 393). Indeed, the first text of this religion is based on the appliance for a kitchen manual. This Schopenhauerian framework informs *Atomised* too, where the 'perfection' of neohumans stems from negation of desire: 'it is certainly true that we have succeeded in overcoming the monstrous egotism, cruelty and anger which they could not . . . without the stimulus

of personal vanity, the pursuit of Truth and Beauty has taken on a less urgent aspect' (Houellebecq, 2000: 378–79; ellipsis added). In an ecocritical context, we can consider this as an injunction to find a way to reframe our relationship with the earth so that 'our desires are not the engine' (McKibben, 1990: 176).

Daniel 25 says, 'According to the Supreme Sister, jealousy, desire and the appetite for procreation share the same origin, which is the suffering of being' (Houellebecq, 2005: 326). Overcoming these desires will allow neohumans to 'reach the state where the simple fact of being constitutes in itself a permanent occasion for joy' (Houellebecq, 2005: 326). This 'simple fact of being' is that fact of being *in the world*, which is to say, forming a relationship with the world not based on destructive and distorting anthropogenic systems. The hidden intention in reviewing these life stories is to move beyond self-negation towards a Nietzschean affirmation that recognises the unity of the world, recast in an Anthropocene context: 'If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not ourselves but all existence' (Nietzsche, 1968: 532). This echoes ecologist Julianne Warren's insistence that we must find a positive generative way for humans to interact with the natural world, to become life *enhancing*, rather than life ruining (2015). Houellebecq's work suggests that the enmity felt by man towards nature is a manifestation of anger at the finite span of human life in comparison to the perceived 'eternity' of nature – the same anger or fear that drives us to conceive of immortal life in the religious sense. We see this when Elohimite leader Vincent says 'We have discovered immortality, and presence in the world; the world no longer has the power to destroy us, it is we, rather, who have the power to create through the power of our vision' (Houellebecq, 2005: 359). This is deeply ironic; in geological terms, the 'immortality' of humans occurs through their unprecedented impact on the world through the institution of their anthropogenic vision. In *The Possibility of an Island*, a generative relationship with the world eludes neohuman Daniel25 because he cannot overcome his own sense of impermanence. Despite the genetic immortality of the neohumans, he is still haunted by the inevitability of his own corporeal decline (Houellebecq, 2005: 421). As such, affirmation remains beyond him.

Houellebecq's deconstruction of the creation myth in the Anthropocene era seeks to problematise the human exceptionalism underpinning the narrative of progress that has served to legitimise the rapacious exploitation of natural resources. Chakrabarty references Marx's assertion that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please' (2009: 202). Similarly, Houellebecq insists that men make their own myths, and that it is no longer a creation myth that dominates, but one more like a creative destruction myth, in the vein of Schumpeter, who is referenced in both novels. This incessant move to innovate and replace, the 'essential fact' about capitalism (Schumpeter, 1942: 83) becomes the mechanism by which the human race rationalises itself out of existence. Djerzinski, and Miskiewicz, the engineers of neohumanity, offer a supremely rational scientific account of progress that appeals to a society in thrall to the 'technical' solution. In *Atomised*, this is associated with the decline of 'human sciences' following a fall from grace by cultural critics such as Lacan, Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze – a warning note, perhaps, in the neoliberal war against humanities in the academy (Houellebecq, 2000: 376). In *The Possibility of an Island*, Daniel 1 recounts how, during an Elohimite retreat, Miskiewicz offers a lecture in which he uses a container full of fluids to represent the chemical composition of a human being. The scientist claims that 'The human being is matter plus information', where this 'information' is not personality or knowledge, but DNA (Houellebecq, 2005: 207). This echoes McKibben's account of the biotechnologist once again:

The biotechnologist looks at organisms not as 'discrete entities', but as a set of instructions on the computer program that is DNA. It is impossible to have respect for a set of instructions: they can always be rewritten. And in the view of the researchers they should be rewritten – ever improved until they meet some state of absolute efficiency. (McKibben, 1990: 155)

In the account of transition between humanity and neohumanity in both novels, this scientific approach is combined with a New Age message, used in strategic advertising campaigns that portray being human as no more than another choice in the catalogue

of choices by which neoliberalism encourages subjects to construct themselves. This dynamic is part of the transformation from 'doing' subject to 'consuming' subject (Rose, 1999: 231) which seeks to make the 'engine of our desire' the very engine of our being. In Houellebecq's account, this is how we come to act on ourselves as we act on the world, with the same gap in self-conception that we seek to fill with stories to inoculate ourselves from the reality we have wrought. We construct a symbolic order that rationalises and obscures its impact on the real, whilst at the same time altering the very foundations of that reality.

The Shock of Shadowtime: Writing an Anthropocene Sensibility

In *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (2016), Ursula Heise draws on Fredric Jameson's theory of science fiction as a genre which allows the reader to historicise their immediate present, listing Houellebecq's work (amongst that of others) as an example of the technique of employing the 'future observer', who renders this historicising possible. In *Atomised*, and even more directly in *The Possibility of an Island*, Houellebecq seeks to mediate the effects of the 'future observer' through his narratives of the present; once again, these aim to construct a way in which we may imagine a 'world without us'. As Chakrabarty writes, 'the current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility' (2009: 197). Rather than historicising our present, then, Houellebecq *futurises* it, utilising the logic of shadowtime to destabilise the temporal space of his narratives and articulate the dual consciousness of the Anthropocene subject. This dual consciousness is that articulated by Seymour, in her account of the absurdity of working as an environmental educator in the face of immanent planetary decline. Shadowtime is understood as 'the sense of living in two or more orders of temporal scale simultaneously,' as outlined by the ongoing Bureau of Linguistical Reality project, compiled by Heidi Quante and Alicia Escott. This experience of temporal disjuncture is, as yet, the best description of the way in which species awareness infiltrates individual consciousness, occurring as it does through the confrontation between human and deep history.

This concept of 'futurising' aims to make visible the increasing tendency of literary fiction to blur the lines between realism and speculative writing. The rise of these 'next five minutes' narratives, to borrow a term from J. G. Ballard (1984), in literary fiction seems to me to give voice to the anthropogenic disjuncture that characterises life for the contemporary subject. Other categorisations are possible, of course – rather than futurised presents, for instance, we might see these as literary shadowtimes. Examples of these narratives are seen in the work of popular literary authors such as Dave Eggers (see Masterson, 2016); Jonathan Franzen – *Freedom* (2010) thematises overpopulation and extinction explicitly and extensively – and Jennifer Egan, whose 2010 novel *A Visit From the Goon Squad* employs similar destabilising of narrative conventions to *The Possibility of an Island*, and gestures towards a future environment drastically different to our own.¹ This is not a comprehensive list or, as yet, a rigorously delineated genre, but is instead an invitation to expand our reading so that we might begin to envision how Anthropocene sensibility is already at work in ways not yet remarked upon.

The starting point for Houellebecq's account of an emergent Anthropocene sensibility is his thematic preoccupation with the way in which the 'values' of individualism, competition and adaptation to chaos, which lie at the core of neoliberalism (Sennett, 2006; Harvey, 2007) (mis)shape the private sphere. As the human subject is 'corroded' by these values, so too is the natural world, distorted and damaged through its recasting as natural capital. These values rely on a solipsistic understanding of the world, which is undermined by the experience of shadowtime, even as subjects struggle to articulate this experience.

Houellebecq offers a vision of negative potential, where the dismantling of those desires naturalised by capitalist systems and the subsequent cessation of productive action is depicted as the potential starting point for a generative relationship with the world beyond the Anthropocene. This account takes as its starting point

¹ That these authors are all American reflects my own research background more than any definitive thesis.

that which seems to be the only limit to capitalism – its unsustainable environmental impacts (as illustrated by Sachs, 2008). The environmental limits to capitalism make real the existential crises of capital. On these terms, Houellebecq offers us not a utopia, or even dystopia, but his best imagining of a human history of negation, cast on both an existential and environmental stage: an 'atopia', to borrow McKibben's phrase (1990: 176).

We might usefully seek to expand readings of atopia as a way to discuss depictions of the future that seek to explore how we might imagine a world which is neither perfect nor terrible, but which instead envision what the world might look like without the primacy of human desire. McKibben suggests certain practical adjustments that might be necessary in order to realise an atopia, which include limiting human reproduction and resource consumption. Beyond this, he suggests, any number of cultures might still exist. This is somewhat optimistic, at least in the face of the account of the contemporary world Houellebecq offers. These practical adjustments would require a complete overturning of neoliberal logic, which relies on the right of the individual to assert their desire over all else. Houellebecq's work makes the case for atopia in its exploration of desire as suffering, and its explicit connection between the form of this desire and the system that creates it. Suffering is a condition of human existence where all existence is denaturalised through its recasting in market logic and where this denaturalisation is *simultaneously re-naturalised* through the *presentation of this system of desires as inevitable and innately human*. Through constructing narratives in which the goal is not the realisation of desire but the recognition of its inadequacy, Houellebecq's work offers a literary groundwork for narratives of atopia.

Following from this, then, the concept of atopia is an effort to answer the problematic of the Anthropocene imaginary, to 'fill in' the authenticity gap through constructing a speculative realm in which the ineluctable reality of planetary crisis might be thought through, or even *written out*. It is this problematic imaginary that lies at the heart of Chakrabarty's assertion that one never experiences being a

concept, and the tension he draws out with regard to constructing an understanding of our current crisis:

The task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital. (2009: 213)

This difficulty is often expressed in the work of ecocritics; as Bruno Latour writes, ‘The problem becomes for all of us in philosophy, science or literature, how do we tell such a story’ (2014: 3). For literature, this is a formal problem. Traditional realist narratives rely on depiction of the human subject as the base model of experience. As such, even a novel with explicit environmental concerns, such as Franzen’s *Freedom*, tends to justify these concerns based on the pleasure derived from natural goods by the human subject. There is a move towards McKibben’s call to ‘believe in the rainforest *for its own sake*’ (1990: 160) but the realist novel cannot take the final imaginative leap because it remains, fundamentally, a story *about people*. As such, realist novels may dramatise the impasse between environmental concern and individual desire, but cannot move beyond it, to imagining the possibility of articulating distress on a species level. Latour and Chakrabarty suggest we have reached a stage where ‘bio’ is no longer enough, and must be replaced by ‘geo.’ For Chakrabarty (2009), this transition from ‘bio’ to ‘geo’ calls for a ‘scaling up’ of our imagination of the human to recognise the magnitude of our impact on the earth. For Latour, the result of this impact means we must explicitly recognise the earth as an agent of history; that is, not a passive site upon which humans stage history, but a body upon which other bodies act with material consequence (2014: 3). For literature, then, the question is how we might come to reconcile this new reality – which is, undeniably, our reality – with the existent narrative models of realism in a way that allows us to think through the apparently unthinkable.

I have previously pointed to the way in which Houellebecq’s neohuman narrative connects his work to Alan Weisman’s endeavour in *The World Without Us*, and to

the difficulty in constructing a future imaginary that takes place at an apparently unimaginable level – if we cannot think of ourselves as species, how can we think of ourselves as extinct? Moreover, how can we think of a ‘world without us’ when the very definition of the world has, for most of human history, been our relationship to it? This is the bind that Houellebecq is negotiating, particularly in *The Possibility of an Island*, where his efforts to portray the Anthropocene subject go beyond explorations of the neoliberal or late-capitalist subject usually read as the exemplary figure of his work. In her insightful study of Houellebecq, Carole Sweeney writes that ‘His fundamental concern is the encroachment of capitalism in its neoliberal biopolitical form into all areas of affective human life’ (2013: ix). This reading is underpinned by an understanding of neoliberal subjectivity that rests on the logic of ‘no alternative,’ after Margaret Thatcher. That is, the horizons of possibility under the economised logic of neoliberal governmentality drastically limit the type of person one may (or should) imagine oneself to be, or seek to become. This is, according to Sweeney, the cause of the affective distress experienced by Houellebecq’s characters, a state characterised by Mark Fisher as ‘captured discontent’ (2008: 80). We see this in *Atomised*, when Michel derides the ‘sex-and-shopping society we live in, where desire is marshalled and organised and blown up out of all proportion’ (Houellebecq, 2000: 192), and again in *The Possibility of an Island*, when Daniel’s despair at being excluded from the neoliberal ‘sexual economy’ leads him to take his own life. ‘Affective distress’ here is a condition of hopelessness in the face of dehumanising logics of neoliberal selfhood, underlined by the experience of powerlessness occasioned by existence in the contingent world. This is the ‘human experience,’ but it is not *all* of human experience. There is, quite literally, more to life than this.

Chakrabarty describes the ecological conditions by which human life (both as we know it – which is to say, in terms of the historical account of human history – and at the condition of bare life) has become possible as ‘boundary parameters of human existence’ (2009: 218). These are, as mentioned above, the material limits to capitalism, which make real its impact at a level beyond (bio)political conception.

This is the point at which *The Possibility of an Island* and, to a lesser extent, *Atomised*, intervene. By my reading, such an intervention is not a radical or unexpected move in Houellebecq's fiction, but a 'natural' progression in his account of the Anthropocene subject (as natural as weather, anyway, as Fisher might have put it). That is, if his work seeks to take on the 'human condition' as we experience it in the contemporary moment, it does not do to give an account of *homo economicus*, or rather, of the distress of subjects who are interpellated to become *homo economicus*. The boundary parameters of human existence are the framework in which neoliberal capitalism operates – a system that perpetuates itself through its insistence on the impossibility of imagining any other way of life is rendered unsustainable through this very insistence. The affective distress of the contemporary (Anthropocene) subject owes much to the material inequalities of neoliberal economics, but equally – and largely unspoken, or barely comprehended – to the precarity of our existence in the face of our environmental impact. This is the meaning of 'shadowtime,' the affective experience of the disjuncture between 'deep' and 'recorded' history or, to put it more plainly, between the stories we tell to make sense of the world, and our experience of living in the world. What McKibben, Chakrabarty, Latour and other ecocritics are arguing is that the stories we construct have material weight in shaping how we live in and act on the world. It is also the reason I think we may more usefully refer to 'futurised presents' when trying to compile a critical language with which to unpick the myth of human exceptionalism that underlies our inability to conceive of ourselves at 'species level': this is an effort to escape the determinations of 'history' as ordering construct.

Memory and Making Meaning

In both *The Possibility of an Island* and *Atomised*, Houellebecq frames a traditionally realist narrative of contemporary human experience within the dense scientific language of speculative fiction, connecting the two with the intermediary narrative of the neohumans. This is most extensively realised in *The Possibility of an Island*, in which the foundational narrative of Daniel1 is interwoven with those of his neohuman successors. In both these novels, the transformation from human to

neohuman is seen as part of a rational project of self-improvement. This recalls McKibben's account of the end of nature through the imposition of a rational, manmade 'nature' that sees 'natural' nature rationalised out of existence. Of this, McKibben says, 'The loss of memory will be the eternal loss of meaning' (1990: 197). It is this 'loss of meaning' that becomes increasingly central to the neohuman narrators of *The Possibility of an Island*. In *Atomised*, the new species narrate collectively, and seem entirely rational. Having overcome the degraded values of humanity, and free from personal vanity, their world seems perfect: as they say, 'Men consider us happy' (Houellebecq, 2000: 378). In contrast, at the end of *The Possibility of an Island*, Daniel²⁵ says, 'Happiness was not a possible horizon' (Houellebecq, 2005: 423).

The neohumans of this latter novel are not the completely rational species of *Atomised*. Their liminality is the defining feature of their existence, as we saw earlier. Closely related to this liminality is the project of meaning-making to which their existence is tied: the reading of and commentary on their predecessor's life narrative. Neohuman lives are defined by the reading of these narratives. Although they can communicate with each other, these interactions are not frequent, nor are they particularly welcome when they do occur. This project literalises the idea that stories shape our world, as well as parodying our own efforts to construct historical meaning through projecting our understanding. The central project of the neohumans is to revisit a past narrative they have no way of understanding. They have, apparently, neither ability nor inclination to 'reenact' it in their minds (see Chakrabarty, 2009: 220). Despite this, as the novel progresses, Daniel¹'s narrative exerts an ever-more irresistible influence on his successors.

Daniel¹'s life narrative is the exemplary life narrative: he was first to embark on the project, and it shaped the transformation from human to neohuman. Daniel¹'s story is one of suffering, and of failed intimacy. Although he achieves success by conventional capitalist measures – his career as a comedian is extremely lucrative – his efforts to find love are all in vain. He establishes a relationship of equals with Isabelle, a successful magazine editor, but this fails as she begins to age and his sexual desire for her becomes inconstant. After this, he takes up with a much

younger woman, an actress called Esther. Although Daniel believes himself to be in love with Esther, their relationship is casual. In the end, she moves to America for the sake of her career; we discover from one of her neohuman successors that she never saw the relationship in quite the same light as Daniel. When relations begin to cool between Daniel and Esther, he understands it to be because of their considerable age difference – or, more exactly, because he is no longer young. The ostensible theme of Daniel1's narrative is the unbearable suffering of aging in a youth-obsessed consumer culture that attributes no value to the elderly. Daniel24 confirms this, in his account of the spectrum of life narratives:

The number of human life stories is 6174, which corresponds to Kapreker's first constant. Whether they come from men or women, from Europe or Asia, America or Africa, whether they are complete or not, all agree on one point: the unbearable nature of the mental suffering caused by old age. (Houellebecq, 2005: 74)

This suffering has, however, another dimension, revealed in Daniel1's final entry to his life narrative:

We are in September, the last holidaymakers are about to leave; with them the last breasts, the last bushes; the last accessible micro-worlds. An endless autumn awaits me, followed by a sidereal winter; and this time I really have finished my task. (Houellebecq, 2005: 373)

The consequence of aging is the foreclosure of generative futurity, the loss of access to 'micro-worlds.' This is not just a fear of death; it is a fear of negation of self through the impossibility of realising desire.

In this same passage, Daniel1 asks what he has done to deserve such a fate, 'And what had men, in general, done?' He continues, 'There is no longer any real world, no world, no human world, I am outside time' (Houellebecq, 2005: 373). Daniel1 implicitly recognises the central problem of the Anthropocene subject: it is our desire that gives us futurity, and futurity that confers meaning on life. At the same

time, it is simply impossible that we continue to exert our desire, against the reality of global crisis change. Elsewhere, Daniel1 writes:

It is under the influence of an ancient animal sense of belonging that people have so many conversations about meteorology and the climate, influenced by a primitive memory, inscribed in the sense organs, and linked to the conditions of survival in the prehistoric era. These circumscribed, clichéd conversations are, however, the symptom of a real issue: even when we live in apartments, in conditions of thermal stability guaranteed by reliable and well-honed technology, it remains impossible for us to rid ourselves of this animal atavism; it is thus that a full awareness of our ignominy and misfortune, and of their complete and definitive nature, can only manifest itself in sufficiently favourable climatic conditions. (Houellebecq, 2005: 364)

All life is suffering, perhaps, but the conditions for suffering, for living, are possible only given the correct parameter boundaries. The 'complete and definitive' account of our suffering must include the recognition that our desire disrupts these boundaries; that our projects of meaning-making, as they are, undo the material circumstance in which any meaning may be made. It is this stasis of meaning that underpins neohuman existence in *The Possibility of an Island* – not a loss, but a stalling, an impasse. For Latour, this epitomises our contemporary problem: 'through a surprising inversion of background and foreground, it is *human* history that has become frozen and *natural* history that is taking on a frenetic pace' (2014: 13). Human history as a concept is stagnant in *The Possibility of an Island*, circumscribed by a finite number of life stories, all of which apparently say the same thing: how terrible it is, to be the cause of one's own ruin.

This suffering is summed up in the conclusion of Daniel1's life story, to which his predecessors do not have direct access. Daniel25 learns the truth of his original's demise from Esther31, who shares the information only reluctantly, at Daniel25's insistence that he must hear it in order to understand his predecessor. In the end, Daniel1 wrote a series of desperate letters to Esther1, culminating in his suicide.

His last letter ended with a poem, and we learn that it is the final verse of this poem that caused neohuman Marie23 to abandon her life in the compound and re-enter the world, in search of some new common society not predicated on individual separation. This last verse runs as follows:

*And love, where all is easy,
Where all is given in the instant;
There exists in the midst of times
The possibility of an island.* (Houellebecq, 2005: 378)

The possibility of an island, as Marie23 understands it, refers to a radical sense of connection between people, now absent from neohuman life. The neohumans no longer reproduce biologically and are supposed to be free from desire because they are free of futurity; their 'immortality' renders them atemporal. The impetus to impose oneself on the world through procreation has been replaced by the direct genetic reproduction of the self. Despite this, as we have seen, they have not managed to liberate themselves entirely. Their propensity to enact an overcoming of self is limited by their nostalgia for desire, and their inability to escape their individualism.

Daniel1's poem has the same impact on Daniel25 as it did on Marie23, and he too leaves his compound and sets off into the world. He is not sure what he is looking for, and suffers many tribulations. At the end of his journey, however, he encounters the sea, which he had previously thought vanished:

So this was what men had called the sea, what they had considered as the great consoler, the great destroyer as well, the one that erodes, that gently puts an end to things. I was impressed, and the last elements missing from my comprehension of the species fell finally into place. I understood better, now, how the idea of the infinite had been able to germinate in the brains of these primates; the idea of an infinity that was accessible through slow transitions that had their origins in the finite; I understood,

also, how a first theory of love had been able to form in the brain of Plato.
(Houellebecq, 2005: 421)

Daniel25's reaction to the sea recasts the 'possibility of an island' and draws on the Platonic theory of love that recognises love as a force of union not with another being, but with the world itself (Levy, 1979). Think of the island of Lanzarote, so often the subject of Houellebecq's work. A volcanic mass in the middle of the ocean, it seems as though it should be barren. In fact, it has a lush and distinctive ecosystem, a 'micro-world' of its own, and is still part of a global environmental order. Overcoming the suffering of separation, for Houellebecq, requires a radical refiguring of our place in the world. We see this, too, in *Atomised*, where Michel Djerzinski is similarly captivated by the sea:

Many witnesses attest to his fascination with this distant edge of the Western world, constantly bathed in a soft shifting light, where he had come so often, where, as he wrote in one of his last notes 'the sky, the sea, the light converge'. We now believe Michel Djerzinski went into the sea. (Houellebecq, 2000: 365)

Like the mouse Reepicheep in C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), Djerzinski steps off the edge of the world. Where Reepicheep sought Aslan's country – Lewis's stand in for Christian heaven – Djerzinski seeks the negation of human existence: union with the sky, the sea, the light – the world. The possibility of an island is the possibility of overcoming human desire in order to find a way in which we might establish a positive generative relationship with the world beyond ourselves. McKibben writes:

I tried to pick out the few constellations I could identify – Orion's Belt, the Dippers. The ancients, surrounded by wild and even hostile nature, took comfort in seeing the familiar above them – spoons and swords and nets. But we will need to train ourselves not to see these patterns. The comfort we need is inhuman. (1990: 200)

Houellebecq's work parodies the impasse of our 'authenticity gap', and follows the neoliberal rhetoric of choice to its illogical extreme. This is *Bartleby's* famous negation, "I would prefer not to" (Melville, 1856), re-inscribed at the level of DNA. Humanity, in Houellebecq's account, would prefer not to – not to think, not to transform, not to act on the world any more, when all action imperils a future that is less and less far away. Why change yourself, when you could change your species? After all, all we have to lose is our nature – unless we too can come to understand the possibility of an island.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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